MUSIC RESEARCH ANNUAL
A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF KEY ISSUES IN MUSIC STUDIES

Article title: “Music and (Linguistic) Meaning”

Author: Andy Hamilton

Full citation: Hamilton, Andy. 2026. “Music and (Linguistic) Meaning.” *Music Research Annual* 7: 1–18. https://doi.org/10.48336/XMK5-CQ71

https://musicresearchannual.org/

ISSN 2563-7290

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Music and (Linguistic) Meaning

Hamilton, Andy. 2026. "Music and (Linguistic) Meaning." *Music Research Annual* 7: 1–18. ISSN 2563-7290

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ABSTRACT: In what sense does music have meaning? In one sense, it uncontroversially does—the sense in which music-making, and listening, are meaningful activities. Only a philistine might deny it. What is controversial is whether music possesses anything analogous to meaning in a narrower sense—*linguistic* meaning. In what sense is music a *language*? That is my present topic. The contrast between linguistic and broader senses of meaning has led to much confusion, which it is one of my tasks to untangle. For a Wittgensteinian such as the present writer, not every philosophical proposition—and philosophical debate—is in good order as it stands. That is true of the proposition that "Music is a language," as well as the debate over music and meaning. The received view, both generally and academically, is that music is a kind of a language, metaphorically if not literally. In this article, I reject the received view, arguing that music has neither a semantics nor a syntax—for a syntax must potentially have a semantics and music cannot. I develop Kathleen Higgins's persuasive account of the relation between music and language that reverses the received view, holding that we might justly call language a music. The reversal is salutary. My conclusion is that *music and language are inter-penetrating phenomena and concepts*.

KEYWORDS: philosophy; language; Wittgenstein; semantics; syntax; understanding; amusia

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Aesthetics of music is the philosophy of music, both as art and as entertainment. It considers fundamental conceptual questions about the nature of music, drawing on empirical data in a different way from the sciences as well as the arts and humanities. Philosophy is generally and rightly considered one of the arts, but every art and science has a philosophical element or dimension. The question of the relationship between the empirical and the philosophical is an intractable one that cannot be considered here—except to say that philosophical claims and conclusions are not based on empirical data, but they draw on it nonetheless, in ways illustrated by the present article.

Among the philosophical questions that fall under the purview of aesthetics or philosophy of music is that of musical meaning. In what sense does music have meaning? In one sense, music uncontroversially has meaning—the sense in which music-making, and listening, are meaningful activities. Only a philistine might deny this. What is controversial is whether music possesses anything analogous to meaning in a narrower sense—that of *linguistic* meaning. In what sense is music a *language*? That is my present topic. The contrast between linguistic and broader senses of the term "meaning" has led to much confusion, which it is one of my tasks to untangle. For a Wittgensteinian such as the present writer, not every philosophical proposition—and philosophical debate—is in good order as it stands. This is true of the proposition that "Music is a language" as well as the debate over music and meaning. The difficulty is to discover where or how the disorder arises.

The received view, both generally and academically, is that music is a kind of a language, metaphorically if not literally. (Though recently some philosophers have denied this view of music as language, as we will see.) Thus for music critic Eduard Hanslick (1986), "Music…is a kind of language which we speak and understand yet cannot translate" (30). This view is echoed by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1964] 1983), who refers to music as "the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable" (18). Ludwig Wittgenstein ([1977] 1998) is more ambivalent, writing that "some music at least, makes us want to call it a language; but some music of course doesn't" (62). Since the late nineteenth century, writers have argued that music has a syntactic structure but is not actually a language because it has no semantics (Adorno 1993).

When I first wrote on the issue of music as language, in the first edition of *Aesthetics and Music* (Hamilton 2007), I had not reflected properly on it and simply assumed the received view. Now I will reject that view, arguing that music has neither a semantics nor a syntax, for a syntax must potentially have a semantics and music cannot. Even Wittgenstein's ambivalent interpretation of the received view seems mistaken (though see discussion below). A more persuasive account of the relation between music and language is advocated by philosopher Kathleen Higgins (2012), who argues that a linguistic model often obscures music's centrality to human life. "Music more holistically communicates an overall sense of intentional orientation than does language. At the same time, using language as a model for music obscures the extent to which linguistic communication relies on musical characteristics [and capacities]" (79–80). By "intentional orientation," Higgins means something like "intentions in a general sense"—the kind of intentions that a dog would understand in their owner's communications, for instance. Another example of the latter is the way that caregivers enhance vocal messages to prelinguistic infants by making those messages more musical.[1] These considerations lead Higgins to reverse the received view: "we might justly call language a music" (80). The reversal is salutary. It provokes another reversal concerning music, that of the common claim that learning music is useful for developing mathematical skills. One might rather say that learning mathematics is useful for developing musical skills.

My conclusion is that *music and language are inter-penetrating phenomena and concepts*. (This is part of the conceptual holist position defended in Hamilton 2013b.) Neither music nor language is subordinate to the other, as Higgins's reversal shows. One can ask both "What linguistic features does music have?" and "What musical features does language have?" The principal objection to the assumption that music is a language is that it denies this inter-penetration, in favor of the dominance of language. The received view is often scientistic—in the sense of regarding the hard sciences as the paradigm of human knowledge—and so I conclude the article with a critique of scientism concerning music, which I reject in favor of a philosophically humanist approach.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW THAT MUSIC IS A LANGUAGE

This article focuses on the English-language literature about theories of musical meaning, by philosophers based in North America and the UK. Leading contemporary scholars in this area include Leonard Meyer, Susanne Langer, Peter Kivy, Roger Scruton, Jerrold Levinson, Stephen Davies, and Andrew Kania. I also discuss European philosophers, such as Wittgenstein and Adorno, who wrote in German. The topic has also been examined by semioticians of music, such as Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Eero Tarasti, and scholars who draw on the work of American philosopher C. S. Pierce, such as Naomi Cummings, Philip Tagg, and Tom Turino, which I do not discuss. In an earlier version of this article, a referee pointed out, all of my examples came from Western music. This has now been addressed, and is not true of my work in general (notably my book *Aesthetics and Music*). But the criticism raises an important issue. The article is philosophical, and so it would be wrong to say that the focus of the article is Western music. The focus is music as such, and its arguments would have been weakened if examples were taken entirely from Western music.

A few words on the concept of music are in order. Conceptualizations of music have changed historically and varied across cultures. The Western system of fine arts appeared in modern form as late as the eighteenth century and does not apply universally, either in historical or cross-cultural terms; therefore, one cannot appeal straightforwardly to the post-Enlightenment concept of art in characterizing music.[2] Recent ethnomusicological and anthropological studies have shown that many languages have terms which cover only part of what contemporary Europeans mean by "music." Inuit and most North American Indigenous languages do not have a general term for music; the Blackfoot language, for example, has *saapup* as its principal word for music, but this means something like "singing, dancing and ceremony." (This example and the ones below come from Nettl 2001; see also Nettl 1989, Robertson-DeCarbo 1976). In Africa, there is no term for music in the languages of Tiv, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Birom, Hausa, Idoma, Eggon, Luo, or Jarawa. Even considering European languages, German distinguishes *Musik* and *Tonkunst*, though the latter

term is now considered to be antiquated.[3] Canadian composer and soundscape authority R. Murray Schafer (1977) brings the anthropological argument back home to Western music. He argues that before the musical sounds in our cities—church bells, the letter carrier's horn—were replaced by mechanical noises and music moved into the concert hall, music and "noise" were not distinct categories.[4] "Noise" was considered to be musical, and music was an everyday sound. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (2001) allows that all cultures have something that sounds to Western ears like music and "have a kind of sound communication that they distinguish from ordinary speech." But he wonders whether "the various things that are distinct from speech [are] really at all the same kind of thing?" (466).

Since ancient times, philosophers, musicologists, and lay commentators have compared music to language. (Here, I set aside the distinct but related issue of music that has words, discussed in Hamilton [2026, chap. 9].) Early examples include Plato (*The Republic* book 3; *Laws* book 2) and Aristotle (*Politics* book 8; *Poetics*). The language metaphor has always been pervasive in writing on music, but many who use it seemingly fail to realize that it is a metaphor. The key question is, what does the metaphor illuminate? Before the modern era, music was commonly regarded as language-like—call this the *simple linguistic model*. Only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was Western art music emancipated from this model. For music theorist Carl Dahlhaus (1989), the replacement of a literary model with an autonomy model was a paradigm shift in music history: "If instrumental music had been a 'pleasant noise' *beneath* language to the common-sense estheticians of the eighteenth century, then the romantic metaphysics of art declared it a language *above* language" (9, italics in the original).[5] But this shift in some sense preserved a language model, which we can call the *language above language thesis*. According to the romantic metaphysics of art, instrumental music was not a lower form of vocal music. Rather, it was the highest musical expression—the paradigm of absolute music (see Bonds 2014).

A prototypical example of this romantic metaphysics of art, and its associated language above language thesis, is found in Arthur Schopenhauer's ([1844] 1969) treatise *The World as Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer treats music as a "universal language," in the "language above language" sense. As musicologist Robert Morgan (1984) writes, for Schopenhauer "It was as if music, suddenly removed from the semantic and syntactic foundation previously supplied by language, had to discover its own grammar" (448). Note Morgan's confusion, for he apparently accepts that music remains *a* language, even if it is not a simple one. For Schopenhauer, the composer is a clairvoyant who "reveals the inner nature of the world, and expresses the deepest wisdom in a language which his reason does not understand" ([1844] 1969, 1:336). He regards music as a uniquely privileged medium that penetrates to the essence of reality, expressing things inaccessible to language.

Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music is the most florid expression of the language above language thesis. For example, he writes: "In a language intelligible with absolute directness, yet not capable of translation into that of our faculty of reason, [music] expresses the innermost nature of all life and existence" ([1844] 1969, 1:336). Thus, Schopenhauer believed that music allows us to apprehend the world in a manner akin to philosophical contemplation. In a famous phrase, he writes that music is "an unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know it is philosophising." Music attempts to do "intuitively" (1:260) and "unconsciously" (1:264) what philosophy does in fully rational form.

Musicologist Max Paddison argues that following the decline of romanticism from the 1840s, an *aesthetics of expression* was increasingly opposed by an *aesthetics of form*. The former finds aesthetic value in music's expressive power and the listener's emotional response; the latter locates aesthetic value in the structure of the musical work (*formalism*). Schopenhauer was associated with the aesthetics of expression, though his position on this dichotomy is complex. Acknowledging that music has been regarded as the language of feeling, just as words are the language of reason, Schopenhauer denies that it can express particular emotions. He argues instead that subordinating music to listeners' feelings, association with words, or programmatic imitation degrades music to the level of the phenomenal world. The aesthetics of form was new, a sign of music's rising status, and Schopenhauer thus took a position that accepted parts of both aesthetics. As Paddison (2001) has observed, Friedrich Nietzsche subsequently built on all of this and argued that the material of music is permeated with meaningful gestures and thus fused the aesthetics of

expression with that of form. Hanslick has the reputation of a rigorous formalist, though in fact matters are not so simple—both the aesthetics of form and the aesthetics of expression contributed to the ideal of absolute music, of which he is regarded as a leading proponent.

The language metaphor persists after Schopenhauer. Thus, for Wassily Kandinsky ([1911] 1982)—the avant-garde painter and art theorist who inspired and was inspired by composer Arnold Schoenberg—"Music, which externally is completely emancipated from nature, does not need to borrow external forms…to create its language" (154). Similar views were expressed by the twentieth-century philosophers John Dewey ([1934] 2005), Leonard Meyer, and Susanne Langer (1990). Dewey comments: "If all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, the arts of painting and music would not exist. There are values and meanings that can be expressed only by immediately visible and audible qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into words is to deny their distinctive existence" ([1934] 2005, 74). On this view, music is a language but—in the case of the kind of music most highly valued by these thinkers, absolute music—a language that of necessity does not use words. This is yet another version of the language above language thesis. (Dewey's assumption of this thesis is expressed in a philosophically questionable way, however.)

Uncritical use of the linguistic metaphor remains ubiquitous in contemporary musicology. Thus Morgan's (1984) history of twentieth-century music discusses "developments in musical language" (450) during the early part of this period, referring to "the standardized grammar of Western tonality" (451). For him, "Musical modernism is marked…by its 'linguistic plurality' and the failure of any one language to assume a dominant position" (443), and he comments that "major progressive composers of the first decade of the new century undertook a radical dismantling of the established syntax of Western music" (450). Similarly, musicologist James Johnson (1995) comments that a music-lover of 1750, transported in time, would regard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as "so far beyond the horizon of expectations as to seem another language, pleasant to hear or see, perhaps, but nonetheless foreign, indecipherable, and therefore meaningless" (3).

These authors do not explain what they mean when they depict music as a kind of language. But their assumption is not the simple language model of the premodern era, discussed earlier. Contemporary writers such as Morgan and Johnson tend to see music as a "language of the emotions." Thus musicologist Robert Hatten (1994) expresses a common assumption underlying the classical opposition between major and minor modes: "Minor has a narrower range of meaning than major.… [It] consistently conveys the tragic, whereas major is not simply the opposite (comic), but must be characterized more generally as nontragic…the heroic, the pastoral, and the genuinely comic.… [In contrast,] in the early Baroque, minor does not consistently invoke expressive states within the realm of the tragic" (36). Though his work appeared earlier, Deryck Cooke's (1959) classic work *The Language of Music* goes further than Hatten in trying to supply a lexicon for this language of the emotions. Though he applies it only to Western music in the modern era, he fails even there, it is generally recognized. Feelings may be classified in musical expression, he argues, and feelings, not concepts, are thus rendered by this language.

The language comparison therefore persists in musicology. But it is no longer the consensus in analytic philosophy. Indeed, philosopher Aaron Ridley (2004) refers to "the [orthodoxy] of analytic aesthetics…that music and words are simply too unlike to be worth comparing" (22). For Kivy (2007), music has no (linguistic) meaning; it has quasi-syntactic structures but no semantic content. Philosopher Stephen Davies (1994) agrees that music does not have linguistic meaning. Drawing from linguistics, he holds that words belong to a system of symbols whose proper deployment is secured by meaning-rules. Musical meaning, in contrast, is not of this kind, Davies holds: music is not a "symbol system" in the relevant sense. So, for him, music cannot be meaningful in the way that language is. However, Davies allows the distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic meaning, which I made at the start of this article. This distinction fits within intuitions that most people have about music—that (good) music makes sense and can be said to have its own distinctive form of meaning.

With all of this in mind, I argue that writers can cite several ways in which music lacks features of linguistic meaning:

1. *Reference*. A piece may have codelike elements such as leitmotifs and *idées fixes*, but these are not systematic from work to work. Music has no general ability to refer. There are no referring terms in music, except onomatopoeia.
2. *Truth-value*. Philosopher Jerrold Levinson (1981) argued that musical passages possess expressive contents which correspond to the succession from one emotional state to another. These passages could be assessed for truth values accordingly. But rather than saying, as Levinson does, that music has expressive contents, which are similar to linguistic meaning, it would be better to say that music has an expressed character but lacks truth values per se.
3. *Assertoric function*. Music cannot be assessed for truth values, so cannot make assertions (Davies 1994, 12).

For most contemporary analytic aestheticians, therefore, *music has no analog of linguistic meaning*.

This consensus has its critics, however. Thus Ridley wants to disturb what he regards as the analytic orthodoxy, appealing to Wittgenstein's (1953) remark that "understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one might think" (§527). (Though earlier, we saw Wittgenstein's [(1977) 1998] ambivalence: "[S]ome music at least, makes us want to call it a language; but some music of course doesn't" [62]. He gives no examples.) Ridley endorses the late Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of meaning and understanding—that is, his rejection of *meaning-atomism* (the view that meanings can be defined for terms alone, rather than for sentences or languages) and advocacy of *meaning as use*, which is sometimes referred to as *meaning in use*. (For a valuable account, see Marchesin 2022.) What is meaning as use? It might seem obvious that a pattern of marks on a page, or a sequence of vocalized sounds, cannot be assigned a meaning independently of a language in which they occur and that this meaning is a matter of how the sentence is used by speakers and writers of that language. But Wittgenstein's doctrine of "meaning is use" implies more than this. It seems to exclude certain natural, or at least common, philosophical perspectives on language and meaning, and so has been much contested.

One of these common perspectives is the empiricist view of John Locke and William James, often termed *psychologism*: that the meaning of a word is a psychological entity or state such as a mental representation. Wittgenstein, in contrast, replaces this intellectualist account of meaning (which identifies it with a mental state, often understood as a brain state) with an activity-based account, according to which meaning involves something that is more like following a rule of correct use. On this view, there is no language-independent account of concepts and propositions; possessing a concept is just knowing how to use the word that expresses it, in an indefinite variety of sentences or utterances.

Thus, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) says: "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (§43). In the case of ordinary language, however, dictionary definitions are meant to reflect changes in popular use. It would be wrong to say "Although most people do not use this word as it is defined in the dictionary, the dictionary is nonetheless correct"—rather, on Wittgenstein's view, the dictionary must be seen as inaccurate or out of date. It is essential to recognize that for the later Wittgenstein at least, context makes an essential contribution to the meanings of words.

This contextual doctrine of meaning as use is apparent in Wittgenstein's (1953) comparisons of language and music. "We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by another. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)" (§531). Ridley (2004) therefore concludes that, for Wittgenstein, meaning-atomism in both words and music is mistaken: "When one understands a sentence, [Wittgenstein] suggests, one doesn't merely grasp some additive compound of independently meaningful atoms. Rather, one understands words as meaning what they

do because of the contexts—…the sentences—in which they appear and function. Meaningful parts get their senses from meaningful wholes, and not vice versa" (24).

Thus Ridley rejects the meaning-atomism implicit in Cooke's view that understanding the "language of music" involves understanding the expressive meanings of the short phrases from which musical works are built up. For Cooke, such phrases have stable expressive meanings, and the expressive sense of a musical line is a function of the antecedently meaningful phrases it comprises. Against this view, Ridley argues that Cooke's assumption of meaning-atomism underestimates the sensitivity of his basic phrases to musical context. Thus, a descending minor triad that, for Cooke, expresses "passive sorrow," can express almost anything, depending on context. It follows that a reductive, atomistic theory of linguistic meaning is not applicable to music. (Neither does it apply to language.) Thus, for Ridley, musical meaning is no more mysterious than other kinds. But—to reiterate—his view is not common among contemporary aestheticians. The consensus is that music has no analog of linguistic meaning.

My view is that Wittgenstein rejects meaning-atomism and advocates meaning as use in *both* music and language—but that this position does not imply that music has an analogy of linguistic meaning. As we will see, there are distinct notions of meaning in these different cases.

As in every discipline or practice, the views of specialists differ from general views of their specialism. Most analytic philosophers of mind are materialists; with philosophers in general, even in analytic philosophy, the picture is much more mixed. Similarly, while Wittgenstein is dismissed by most analytic philosophers of mind—increasingly so, since I began my career—nonspecialists are less philistine. Aestheticians, especially of music, differ from philosophers in general. In the context of all of this, my discussion below will address the general consensus in music, philosophy, and elsewhere that music has at least an analog of linguistic meaning.

"SYNTAX WITHOUT SEMANTICS"

In the past century, a popular and initially attractive interpretation of the "music as language" metaphor—with its assumption that music has an analog of linguistic meaning—is that music has *syntax but no semantics*. The first writer to describe music as having a syntax seems to be Hugo Riemann, whose 1877 *Musikalische Syntaxis* analyzed chord progressions in Western music (see Swain 1997, 20). But a developed distinction between syntax and semantics in language appeared only in the 1930s, with the work of Alfred Tarski, and that of Charles Morris. The view then appeared that music is like a language in having a syntactic structure but is not actually a language because it has no semantics—there is no specifiable cognitive content. In music theory, the "syntax without semantics" view has been widely held, especially since the appearance of Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff's (1983) work *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*—a comprehensive treatment of the structural descriptions that allegedly underlie the intuitions of experienced listeners. (In the previous section, we saw that Morgan [1984] likewise assumed that music structure underlies listener intuitions and does so in a way that seems so natural it is hardly noticeable.) Drawing on Noam Chomskian generative grammar, these writers rely on certain supposedly universal constraints on human cognitive functioning, including, in the case of music, gestalt principles of perceptual grouping.

Perhaps, on the syntax without semantics view, music is comparable to Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" ([1871] 1879), which arguably has syntax but not semantics. In contrast, his poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in *Through the Looking-Glass* ([1871] 1879) is pragmatically negated nonsense. It has both syntax and semantics, but not pragmatics—the context needed to make the poem meaningful. However, it may be that "Jabberwocky" relies on a distortion of sense rather than plain nonsense—particularly in passages such as

> Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
> The jaws that bite, the claws that catch! (32)

Other passages, however—the opening lines, for instance—are more like nonsense.

Since Riemann's work, cited above, syntax has come to be associated narrowly with grammar. (This is not "grammar" in Wittgenstein's broader sense, which means something more like "conceptual structure.") Syntax is a feature of structure, rather than semantic content. For Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983), for example, syntax is a system of rules by which structural components are organized hierarchically and arrayed in series. However, as philosopher Wolfram Hinzen noted to me, "If you define syntax so broadly, it applies to anything you can model as a formal system—including plant growth, for example" (email to author, December 2023).

Many things—crystals, for instance—have complex structures, without having a syntax. Syntax is a kind of structure that is essentially apt for semantics; it must follow and be tailored to meaning. Thus, only a system that potentially has a semantics can have a syntax. I say "potentially" because, at least for many philosophers and logicians, there are uninterpreted formal languages with a syntax but no semantics. A semantics can sometimes be supplied, but it is often held that there can be pure syntactic systems that no one has as yet found a semantics for. However, as philosopher James Miller has observed to me: "The syntax/semantics distinction is not precise. Chomsky's insight that syntax can carry some semantic information is widely accepted in linguistics. So I'm not sure that one can have syntax without semantics" (email to author, 2025; see also Over and Evans 2024).

Syntax refers to the ability to combine meaningful semantic units (words) into larger, meaningful strings with a hierarchical structure (sentences). This capacity is essential to human communication and enables us to express an indefinitely large number of thoughts using a limited set of linguistic elements. The phenomenon is known as *compositionality*, and any language must exhibit it. A traditional view, called the *principle of compositionality*, is that the meaning of a complex expression is fully determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituents.

The principle can be controversial; critics argue that the intentions of the speaker and the linguistic environment are also essential.[6] Hence we see here what philosopher P. F. Strawson called a "Homeric opposition" in contemporary philosophy of language, with two opposed traditions. Though they no longer receive the lively attention that they did in the late twentieth century, these rival theories are still central to the philosophy of language. For Donald Davidson, the fundamental concept is sentence-meaning, while for H. P. Grice, it is communication or speaker's intention. As with many oppositions, it is likely that some synthesis of these opposed theories is desirable. Grice's notion of meaning is closer to Wittgenstein's than Davidson's is. Davidson's theory, in contrast, is a conscious reaction against Wittgenstein's view, resting on the insights of Chomsky's linguistics, in particular the infinitary character of language mastery.

The principle of compositionality does not apply to music, however. Development of a musical motif, for example, does not involve compositionality. A musical phrase or passage, as in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumble-Bee," might suggest a bumblebee in flight. But there is no element in the phrase that refers to bumblebees in general and no other element that refers to flying, so that a new meaning could be composed from them—referring to the flight of a jumbo jet, for instance. Another example: in musical composition, "not" cannot figure in the notation, such that adding it could generate an interlude about a bumblebee that was not flying. In this sense, the meaning of works of programmatic music is arbitrary. "Flight of the Bumble-Bee" could equally have been called "Crazy Pneumatic Drill," if such drills had existed when it was composed.

The syntax/semantics distinction has no clear meaning when applied to music, therefore. "Syntax without semantics" is at best a suggestive metaphor—a rough, preliminary thought or intuition, needing correction and further pressing. It does not offer a substantive philosophical solution but is simply a label for a vaguely characterized outcome. We now consider another fundamental problem with the idea that music has linguistic meaning—that "understanding music" is analogous to "understanding language."

IN WHAT SENSE DOES THE LISTENER "UNDERSTAND" MUSIC?

Ridley (2004) is right in commenting, "We don't understand linguistic meaning as well as philosophers of music are given to suppose." However, he is wrong to add that "we're a good deal more at home with musical meaning than they imply" (25). I am not sure that we are "at home" with meaning in *either* context, which I will show by examining what the idea of understanding music involves. My assumption here is that *meaning and understanding are interdependent concepts*. As Jerrold Levinson (1998) remarks, "[M]usical meaning and understanding [are] correlative concepts, so that the meaning of a stretch of music would comprise whatever is understood in understanding it" (Under "Musical Meaning: General"). So, these features must be addressed together. Moreover, *musical meaning and understanding are not to be equated with linguistic meaning and understanding.*

For Ridley—following Wittgenstein—understanding a theme is closer to understanding a sentence than most philosophers of music allow. He begins by quoting philosopher R. G. Collingwood, for whom a musical concert is in one respect like a scientific lecture:

> The lecture is not a collection of noises made by the lecturer with his organs of speech; it is a collection of scientific thoughts related to those noises in such a way that a person who not merely hears but thinks as well becomes able to think those thoughts for himself…what we get out of [a] concert is something other than the noises made by the performers. (Collingwood 1938, 140–141 in Ridley 2004, 17)

Ridley goes on to quote a persuasive account from Roger Scruton of what "something other than the noises" involves:

> There are certain basic perceptions involved in hearing music, and these are crucial to understanding it…. [T]here is the hearing of movement—as when one hears a melody, theme, or phrase, move from one note to another. There is the hearing of tones as opposed to the hearing of pitched sounds…. A person who did not have them [these experiences] would be deaf to music. (Scruton 1983, 79 in Ridley 2004, 18)

Tones are stable pitched sounds that convey movement, as argued by Scruton and developed in the chapter on rhythm in my 2007 monograph *Aesthetics of Music*.[7] But "understanding a lecture" has a particular meaning, as well as the fundamental meaning that it shares with "understanding a piece of music." This fact is neglected in the literature.

The problem is this. Describing the ideas of literary theorist Wolfgang Iser (1978), musicologist James H. Johnson has observed that "a text allows for different meanings while also restricting the possibilities" of meaning (1995, 2). In this context, Johnson, like other writers, assumes that the same concept applies to music. Thus, he writes that "we cannot hear a Haydn symphony the same way Haydn's contemporaries did. Musical meaning does not exist objectively in the work—or even in its composer's intentions…. There is no musical meaning without interpretation" (2). The error is particularly egregious in the case of music. But even for literature, rather than referring to "different meanings," it would be more accurate to say that there is no single correct way of interpreting a text or a piece of music. The greatest art can be interpreted in multiple ways, and performers and listeners are crucial presences relative to it. Different listeners may interpret the same piece of music very differently. As Johnson (1995) writes:

> The insistent oboe playing the dotted eighth-sixteenth pattern in Haydn's Symphony No. 83 is the image of a hen to some, the expression of merriment to others, and an essential thread in a web of indescribable content to others. But it would be hard to argue credibly that it is a funeral dirge, or paints the storming of the Bastille, or promotes slavery. (2)

The symphony was composed in 1785, and the Bastille fell in 1789—clearly, it cannot be interpreted as depicting historical events in the future. The artist, and their work's production in time and space, impose limits on how a

piece can be understood (though, again, there is no single correct interpretation). Another level of misunderstanding might be not realizing that a movement of a sonata is in theme and variations form, in the sense of not hearing that a theme is being varied. This is a misunderstanding of what the received view regards as the syntactic level. For many writers, therefore, a piece of music may have multiple meanings, but there is such a thing as *mis*understanding it.

While agreeing about the possibility of multiple interpretations, I would argue that the notion of musical understanding is much narrower than Johnson and others assume. To reiterate, the comparison of music to a language—and the correlative notion of understanding—is a metaphor. The misunderstanding about theme and variations does not show that music has an analog of literal linguistic meaning. To reiterate Ridley's (2004) view, we do not understand linguistic meaning as well as philosophers of music believe—but he is wrong to add that we understand musical meaning better than they imply (25).

It may be objected that there is a technical, musicological understanding of a musical work or performance. But I hold to the democratic view that nonexpert understandings of musical meaning are equally important to account for (see chap. 4 in Hamilton 2024). But the sense of the term "understanding" that is in question here is more basic. Someone who says, "I like music, but I never feel like moving in time with it" is someone who seems not to understand it *as music*—they do not seem to recognize the performance as a musical one. That is what Scruton is discussing when he refers to "the hearing of movement." It may be objected that a culture could proscribe moving to music. I would like to see examples of this, because the rare cases that come to mind—such as Puritan proscriptions against dance or the Taliban's ban on music—have found great difficulty in enforcing their proscriptions. "Free spirits," who do not like to have their movement constrained by the beat of the music, still find that music makes them want to move.

Misunderstanding a piece of music in this very fundamental sense is not like misunderstanding a scientific lecture or misunderstanding the operating instructions for an electrical appliance. The everyday sense of misunderstanding applies to the latter cases, but not the former. *Someone who misunderstands music, in the way that Collingwood and Scruton describe, has something like a clinical disorder*. Perhaps they suffer from what Oliver Sacks (2011) calls *amusia*—the inability to hear sounds as music. Similarly, they may have a cognitive disorder, which means that they fail to understand speech in any language. Possibly, there is no such thing as "understanding music," in that musical responses are essentially pre-cognitive or primarily a matter of feeling rather than understanding, and such responses are what the sufferer from the disorder lacks.

Amusia is a genuine disorder, unlike what is colloquially known as "tone deafness." Tone-deaf subjects have musical failings that are mild in comparison—for instance, they sing out of tune but can recognize their own national anthem when played on the piano. (In elementary school, the present author was regarded as tone-deaf for this reason but is now a jazz singer with imprecise pitch but moderate interpretational ability.) In contrast is Sacks's (2011) subject D.L., a 76-year-old woman who suffered from congenital amusia. D.L. may have been born with deficits in the auditory cortex. Individuals with congenital amusia do not develop basic musical abilities, despite normal exposure to music during childhood, normal education levels and IQ, and no known neurological or hearing impairments. They may describe the experience of hearing what others call music to be like hearing a meaningless noise, such as the clatter of pots and pans; presumably, their incomprehension extends to the musical sounds of nature, such as birdsong. Amusia has been compared with congenital disorders, such as prosopagnosia (difficulties with face recognition), dyslexia (language), dyscalculia (numbers) and color blindness. Difficulty in processing music-like sounds can also include aspects of speech. Individuals with amusia are not just "bad singers." Their primary problem lies in *hearing* music. They cannot recognize familiar songs and find musical sounds annoying or abrasive.

The congenital amusia of D.L. is rare. Acquired amusia, resulting from brain damage, is much more common. Thus, Sacks discusses Rachael Y., who suffered from dysharmonia, a more specific form of amusia, after being in a car accident that left her paralyzed in her legs and right arm and deaf in her right ear. She was thus unable to hear harmony, though her ability to hear melody remained intact. She also lost the ability to hear the integration of

instruments playing in unison; their sounds were isolated, and she heard each one on its own. Again, this condition prevents the listener from understanding the sounds as music.

Contrast all of this with the situation of my friend Richard Stuart, who does not enjoy performances of freely improvised music and asks, "Is this a joke?" He knows enough of the artistic avant-garde to understand that performances of this music are not really a joke. To regard such performances as pieces of *pure* entertainment rather than the work of artist entertainers would be like someone saying the same of a serious scientific lecture. However, one can fail to understand the lecture in a second sense. I can, for example, fail to understand a scientific lecture delivered in Mandarin simply because I do not speak or understand that language. *This second sense of understanding—involving linguistic meaning—is not found in the case of music.* This is another reason for denying that music possesses linguistic meaning.

The issue of meaning and understanding has also been discussed by philosopher Eran Guter (2025). He is right to argue that Wittgenstein replaces the notion of meaning with that of understanding—or rather, as I would put it, Wittgenstein's concept of "meaning as use" is one that involves understanding. For instance, Guter notes:

> [For Scruton] the thrust of Wittgenstein's paradigm shift in the philosophy of music was the displacement of the notion of musical meaning by the notion of musical understanding.… [I]f music has meaning, then that meaning must be understood by those who hear with understanding, and that understanding is part of a complex social process, which hinges on musicality.… Constraints on understanding are therefore constraints on meaning.… The resistance of the musical gesture to paraphrasing and explication does not denote a tension between the knowable and the unknowable, as Romantic thinkers believed and contemporary analytic philosophers concurred, but rather the tension between different kinds of understanding. (7)

Despite the similarity of his view and mine, Guter does not advocate the conception of musical understanding that I present here.

In my view, "appreciation" is a better term to apply to music—and other arts—than "understanding." For a listener unfamiliar with a musical culture, appreciating its music presents challenges. There is something to the idea that when attending a concert of music from an unfamiliar culture, there are things one may not understand. Getting to understand them can be liberating, as Hanslick fails to realize. I am claiming that immersion in the music offers some corrective. I cannot learn a language simply by listening to it, but I can by listening and observing—seeing what it refers to, and what behavior results. However, saying "A group of people did not understand the piece of music because it belonged to an East Asian musical culture with which they are unfamiliar" is not analogous to saying "A group of people did not understand the lecture because it was delivered in Mandarin, which they do not speak." The reason that these claims are not analogous is *not* that "music is a universal language" but rather that it is unclear what "not understanding the piece of music" means. Here, it clearly does not refer to amusia.

Transcriptions or performed imitations of a piece of music—such as aspiring jazz musicians are encouraged to make—can feature mistakes, but they do not show misunderstanding in the required sense. It makes no sense to attempt to say that one can "translate" a piece of music from a South Asian to a Western musical language. Human language is interwoven with action in a way that music is not; that is, as Wittgenstein said, "meaning is use." The meaning of a word is therefore not defined by reference to the objects it designates or by the mental representations or ideas that are associated with it but by how the word is used in speech acts, such as requesting, promising, warning, apologizing, and predicting. In contrast, it is not clear what "musical meaning is use" could mean.

Thus, "appreciation" is a better term to apply to music, and other artworks, than "understanding." ("Interpretation," which I used earlier, is another possibility.) Appreciation involves recognizing beauty and other aesthetic qualities. Judgments about a piece or work of music are centrally aesthetic; those about scientific lectures are not. This is because music is an art (and also a form of entertainment; see Hamilton 2024, chaps. 1–3). Giving lectures is also in some sense an art—there are particular skills involved—and there are aesthetic judgments about a scientific lecture:

for instance, one might say, "The lecturer didn't speak very eloquently." But lecturing is not one of the fine arts, in the modern Western sense. The defining function of lectures is cognitive: "The lecturer got Einstein's theory wrong" is a fundamental criticism of a lecture that concerns Einstein's theory of relativity, as is "J.M.W. Turner's lectures at the Royal Academy were unintelligible." (He was a notoriously poor lecturer due to his confusing delivery.) "The lecturer had a beautiful voice" is only incidental praise, whereas for an opera singer it is fundamental. Wittgenstein's discussion of understanding is unhelpful, therefore, because understanding is not a central category in one's response to music, or indeed any art in an aesthetic sense (Hamilton 2024). (Nevertheless, the issue is complex, because artistic truth is an important category of aesthetic experience. See Hamilton [2013a].)

THE MEANING OF A WORK AND THE LANGUAGE-LIKE CHARACTER OF MUSIC

I wrote at the start that in one sense, music uncontroversially has meaning—the sense in which music making and listening are meaningful activities. To reiterate, only a philistine would deny this. What is controversial is whether music possesses anything analogous to *linguistic* meaning—that is, in what sense it is *language-like*. Support for my position is found in the work of Peter Lamarque (2017), who holds that philosophical problems arise when aestheticians take the model of sentence meaning as paradigmatic:

> [I]n the philosophy of literature, there is endless use of the phrase "the meaning of the work"…. The problem rests with taking the model of sentence meaning as paradigmatic. The phrase "the meaning of the work" draws its inspiration from the phrase "the meaning of the sentence." That is where things go wrong, because it encourages analytical philosophers to appeal to…familiar theories of sentence meaning in talking about literary art. (118)[8]

Lamarque's comments apply not only to literary art but across all the arts, including music. As he writes, artworks do not have "*meaning* in any literal sense…but something more like a vision or theme or value experienced" (118, italics in the original).

One can agree with Lamarque that music is not a language while still maintaining that it has a *language-like character*. This acknowledgment is compatible with the *humanistic conception of music* defended in my *Aesthetics of Music* (2007, 2026), according to which music is a human activity grounded in the body and bodily movement and interfused with human life. The humanistic conception can acknowledge music's language-like character by describing it as "*thinking in music, thinking with sounds, the way a writer thinks with words*" (Combarieu quoted in Dahlhaus 1989, 3, italics added). (Revising the final phrase as "just as writing involves thinking with words" might improve this idea.) The notion of "thinking with sounds" suggests a form that thinking takes, rather than simply a beautiful pattern of sounds caused by thought. Music is a special kind of thinking that brings together the sensuous and intellectual, with unique intensity and sophistication, an idea developed by Julian Johnson (2002). This understanding recognizes that thinking does not only include linguistic activity but is much broader. (Thus, the "language of thought" hypothesis developed by philosopher Jerry A. Fodor [1975] is misguided.) Music is not a purely intellectual exercise, but is irreducibly physical, bodily and material. It arises in singing and dancing, but making music by playing instruments is just as ancient. Its dual status as an exercise of the intellect that is also grounded in the human body and its movement should be affirmed. These two dimensions reflect the nature of the aesthetic in general, which synthesizes the cognitive and the sensory, thought and experience.

"Thinking with sounds" implies that the creation or making of music involves intellectual or cognitive capacities. That should hardly be a revelation, and it does not imply that music involves linguistic meaning. The language-like character of music is persuasively captured by Adorno ([1963] 1992), and this is part of his general claim that all artworks, not just literary ones, possess a "language-character," which he links with truth-content. By this he means that elements that are not in themselves meaningful are organized into a meaningful structure:

> Music resembles language in that it is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds. They say something, often something human. The better the music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is like logic: it can be right or wrong. But what has been said cannot be detached from the music. Music creates no semiotic system. (1)

On Adorno's view, the truth-content of a Mahler symphony is not expressed by the metaphysical pronouncements favored by programmatic interpretations, nor are Wagner's music-dramas decoded by a literal process of motif identification. Adorno's (1993) example of this is musical affirmation, "the judicious, even judging, affirmation of something that is, however, not expressly stated" (403), such as the recapitulation in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Because of its similarity to language, Adorno believes, music constantly poses a riddle, which it never answers. But this is true of all art, he insists. Even when its medium is linguistic, what the artwork says is not what its words say, and so the cases of music and literature are not so distinct: "No art can be pinned down as to what it says, and yet it speaks" (410).

The debate over music and meaning is elucidated by Levinson (1998) and Nettl (2001) in terms of an opposition between referentialists (which Levinson calls "heteronomists") and nonreferentialists (which he calls "autonomists"). Writes Levinson: "The autonomist position is that music has no meaning, or else that it means only itself (…[i.e.,] 'intra-musical' meaning). The heteronomist position is that music has some sort of meaning that is other than the music itself (… [i.e.,] 'extra-musical' meaning)" (1998, under "6. Musical Meaning: General"). Levinson concedes that it is difficult to find thinkers whose views wholly exemplify either position. Hanslick is closest to a complete autonomist, Schopenhauer to a complete heteronomist.

For Nettl (2001), it is simplistic to ally referentialism with program music and nonreferentialism with absolute music. Extramusical referents vary in complexity from a mere descriptive title to the Wagnerian leitmotif, which associates a particular musical phrase with a person, place, or object. Referentialists do not require an explicit program, and nonreferentialists may not denigrate program music, though they distinguish extramusical program and musical meaning.

This opposition between internal and external—that music is autonomous and "means itself" or that it can refer to meanings external to itself—is dubious, however. It rests on a false assumption concerning the nature of music: the common assumption that *music is essentially a sonic or aural art*. On this view, the sound is "music itself," a position we could call *sonicism*. However, to say this is to forget that it is part of human nature to move to music (see Hamilton 2007, 2026). No reflective individual could believe that music is exclusively a sonic art, but when philosophers say "Nothing relevant in the music literally moves," that is what they seem to assume. The falsity of sonicism is shown by the conceptual holism of music, dance, and poetry, according to which music is a cross-sensory practice and phenomenon. The "in the music" locution, in contrast, seems to rest on the sonicist assumption that performance is a mere concomitant of pure music. (Ultimately, this assumption leads to Platonism about music.) Sonicism may also rest on *acousmaticism*, the view that music is essentially an unseen, auditory or acoustic art, involving sounds without reference to their means of creation. (The acousmatic thesis thus holds that listening to music essentially involves hearing sounds without experiencing their means of production.)

Modern developments in the history of Western music seem to suggest the view that music is essentially a sonic art. The classical concert seems to make music a purely aural phenomenon; audiences often close their eyes and avoid moving. Most musical listening now occurs privately, or as muzak. Against these developments, however, much pop music is for dancing, and no one could hold that it appeals to the ears exclusively. Consider an analogous view about food, *olfactism*, which would hold that food's exclusive appeal is to taste. Olfactism neglects the many functions of food within human culture—friendship, family, ritual, and nutrition. All societies take pleasure in food; however, in modern times food has, perhaps, become more olfactory because of the rise of gourmet dining, just as music has become more aural because of the phenomenon of concert listening.

Sonicism—like the "unique interpretation" account of the musical score, according to which one interpretation is privileged—is so implausible that it is hard to see how anyone could believe it. And when the view is presented to philosophers, they may deny that they hold it. But people are often unaware of their philosophical assumptions. It is true that objections to sonicism are now found in the philosophical literature—particularly by writers who argue that the perception of music is multimodal. Thus for Jenny Judge (2019), tones (i.e., music sounds in experience) move, though their physical components—sounds—do not. Rhythm is not just a matter of sounds, she argues; it is not even just a matter of auditory experience, and she concludes that central aspects of musical experience are multimodal. Matthew Nudds (2019) sees a constitutive connection between our capacity to perceive the metrical properties of music and our capacities for bodily movement. To claim that music, dance, and poetry are integrated practices is to reject sonicism. Further discussion of this intractable and fundamental issue takes us away from the issue of music and meaning and so awaits a future occasion.

"LANGUAGE IS A MUSIC": REVERSING THE RECEIVED VIEW

In conclusion, I turn to a more plausible account of the relation between music and language suggested by Kathleen Higgins (2012). She allows that "both involve sound addressed to hearing and have rules for combining elements. [In both] the resulting strings of sound events are meaningful, and both link human beings to the external world" (78). However, as she goes on to say, music and language differ in their means and in what they communicate. Higgins rightly argues that "music's centrality to human life is often obscured by the dominance of a linguistic model," which conceals aspects of its communicative powers. "Music more holistically communicates an overall sense of intentional orientation than does language. At the same time, using language as a model for music obscures the extent to which linguistic communication relies on musical characteristics [and capacities]" (79–80). An example of the latter reliance is the way that caregivers enhance vocal messages to prelinguistic infants—compared to those made to adults—by making them more musical.

Higgins follows composer and semiotician David Lidov (2004), for whom "the musical aspect of speech is truly of its essence" (14). On the back cover of his book *Is Language a Music?* (2004), Lidov thus asks, "If music is a universal language, is language a universal music?" Higgins draws from his question the ingenious reversal that "we might justly call language a music" (80). This kind of reversal is salutary. Here, one might make an analogy with the common claim that learning music is useful for developing one's mathematical skills. One should thus reverse and hold that learning mathematics is useful for developing one's musical skills.

Tonal features—in the broadest sense of stable, enduring, pitched sounds—are found in all languages, and intonation changes meaning (see Hamilton 2026, chap. 4). Mandarin has specific features that affect semantic meaning, and English has more general tonal features. In English, for instance, a rising pitch at the end of the sentence distinguishes a question from a statement ("Going home now?" versus "Going home now"). There is also an "intonation of intimacy," as when a parent speaks to a child that needs reassurance. All languages have these musical features, therefore, and all (kinds of) music has (or have) linguistic features. Holding this view would be to vindicate the reversal that Higgins exploits. (Written language and sign language do not have tonal features. But these are not central cases and do not affect my overall argument.)

These claims need elaborating. To say that all kinds of music have linguistic features does not go against the main theme of this article—that music does not have linguistic meaning, as conventionally understood. This is because the conventional claim fails to recognize the interdependence of music and language. That is the article's main assertion. Likewise, the conventional aesthetic theory of art—that art is that which has aesthetic qualities—fails to understand the interdependence of art and the aesthetic. (The latter claim is a theme of my 2024 book *Art and Entertainment*.)

The idea that music and language are interdependent practices is expressed more obscurely in Wittgenstein's (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, in a passage already quoted from briefly:

> Understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a spoken sentence is closer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. Why [in a given instance] is just this the pattern of variation in intensity and tempo? One would like to say: "Because I know what it all means." But what does it mean? I'd not be able to say. As an explanation, I could only compare it with something else which has the same rhythm.… (§527)

However, Wittgenstein is not as specific as Higgins (or the view that I wish to defend) in asserting this interdependence.

As Higgins's reversal shows, music and language are interpenetrating phenomena and concepts, neither of which is subordinate to the other. One can ask both "What linguistic features does music have?" and "What musical features does language have?" The principal objection to the assumption that music is a language is that it denies this inter-penetration, in favor of the dominance of language.

CONCLUDING NON-SCIENTISTIC POSTSCRIPT

There is a further general assumption that underlies the idea of music as a language, and I now discuss it in a coda to the article. This is the assumption of many writers that their claims on music and meaning find support in neurophysiology. In this final section, I wish to enter a cautionary note about this assumption, which results from the scientistic bias of many writers on music and meaning, whether they are in philosophy or musicology. *Scientism* is the view that the physical or natural sciences constitute the paradigm of human knowledge, on which other disciplines must model themselves. It leads to a failure to recognize the importance of philosophical understanding—with philosophy regarded as one of the humanities—and especially the holistic philosophical arguments I have outlined, concerning the interdependence of music and language. It is part of the madness of the age. My Wittgensteinian position is not anti-science, it is anti-scientism. Science tends to assume a dominance over the humanities that results in wasteful and pointless research into the alleged philosophical implications of neurophysiology. At the same time, one must defend science from climate change and vaccine deniers, as well as from the antics of the Trump administration.

This scientistic assumption is found even in the work of Higgins, and is in tension with her holistic insights. She writes: "Patients with amusia (the loss of certain musical abilities) due to brain lesions do not necessarily develop aphasia (an inability to speak)," nor vice versa (2012, 78). This, she continues, suggests neurological dissociability of the two systems, which seem to involve separate brain areas. For some writers, this dissociability would support the view that music and language involve independent capacities. However, I do not think that anything philosophical follows from this fact, concerning the relation of music and language.

Similar scientistic assumptions are found in the work of Diana Raffman (1993), who assumes the conventional, nonholistic view of music and language. She comments that music has a syntax and a "quasi-semantics"—or, at least, it does so for a privileged class of "experienced listeners": such a listener has

> unconscious knowledge of certain rules for musical analysis. As you hear an incoming musical signal, you unconsciously represent it and analyse it according to those rules…[and] assign it a structural description. *Ex hypothesi* it is in virtue of [this] that you…hear or, as we often say, *feel* music as you do. For example, it's in virtue of assigning such an analysis that you feel the tonic as being the most stable pitch in a scale, or an accent as being relatively strong in its metrical context, or a harmonic progression as being "tense" or "relaxed." As Lerdahl and Jackendoff will put it, having the right sort of musical structure in your head is what *understanding* the music consists in. (19, italics in the original)

Raffman distinguishes linguistic semantics and the "quasi-semantics" of music:

> Whereas the relation of a linguistic string to its meaning is a more or less conventional one, the relation of a musical string to the relevant feelings is nonconventional: we are presumably just *wired* in such a way as to have these feelings upon tokening those mental representations. Not surprisingly, the tie between music and feelings is considerably tighter than the tie between a sentence and its meaning. (55)

This is an implausibly neurophysiological interpretation of the idea that musical meaning is tied up with the emotional responses it evokes.

There is no support for the idea of musical meaning in the common assumption that neurophysiological data provides direct support for philosophical claims, as opposed to an illustration of them. For familiar Wittgensteinian reasons, Raffman's formulation "having the right sort of musical structure in your head" cannot be "what *understanding* the music consists in" (19). As Wittgenstein explained, understanding is something exhibited by thinking, feeling, and acting subjects, not by brains or heads—except perhaps insofar as the latter are nodding in time with the music. Understood in this way, a functioning brain is a necessary condition for understanding, but it is not sufficient for it.

The position that I am assuming here is *philosophical humanism*, defined primarily in opposition to *scientism*. (To reiterate, the latter view holds that the physical or natural sciences constitute the paradigm of human knowledge, on which other disciplines must model themselves; for a general discussion of this topic, see Sorrell 1991.) Scientism, in most of its manifestations, is committed to the foundational status of physics. However, humanism also rejects the (standardly religious) view that may be termed *exceptionalism*, which regards the "human animal" as a contradiction in terms and holds that human beings are the only biological entity that cannot be grouped with others on any level. The opposed poles that humanism rejects, then, are scientism and exceptionalism. The *humanistic conception of music*, defended in my monograph *Aesthetics of Music*, is a species of philosophical humanism in this sense.

Philosophical humanism opposes scientism through the following claims:

1. The explanation of human behavior is irreducibly personal. It essentially rests on commonsense psychology and the attribution of beliefs, desires, intentions, and similar attitudes. The explanation of human behavior, on this view, is not exclusively personal; subpersonal and neural explanation has a place here, but not, as in scientism, the ultimate one. The fact that it accords subpersonal and neural explanation a place means that humanism does not amount to exceptionalism as defined above, whose implications will shortly be pursued.
2. The humanities comprise a relatively distinct group of disciplines concerned with the human rather than physical world, whose forms of explanation are not reducible to those of the natural sciences.

Philosophical humanism may also embrace a third claim about the discipline of philosophy:

3. Philosophy is a part of the humanities and is not a proto- or meta-science, though it overlaps with the sciences, and with religion.

Scientism denies all three of these claims.

Bernard Williams (2008) and Peter Hacker (2001) advocate humanism in the above tripartite sense. Williams, treating philosophy as part of a "wider humanistic enterprise of making sense of ourselves and our activities" (197), rightly takes history as the paradigm humanistic discipline. Hacker (2001) argues that the humanities require concepts not deployed by the natural sciences and makes the essential point that one can acknowledge the value of science without being committed to scientism: "Forms of rational understanding and explanation are diverse and

logically heterogeneous. Science and humanism were…allied in [combating] unreason, moral and political dogma, and…religion" (71–72). Humanists must acknowledge the value of science; not to do so would be absurd. Their opposition is to a philosophical *misreading* of science.

Claim (1) above rejects scientistic philosophies of mind, holding that whole-person ascription involving the intentional stance is the fundamental level of explanation of human behavior. Humanism does not regard subpersonal or brain processes as irrelevant to the attribution of psychological states and the explanation of human behavior; the humanist claim is that human behavior cannot be completely, or best, explained in terms of it. An instance would be the treatment, and explanation, of depression; the effectiveness of drug therapy clearly involves subpersonal explanation, while that of psychotherapy may not. In comparing the two lines of treatment, the problem is how to connect these two levels of explanation. But what humanism insists is that the explanation of human behavior essentially involves whole-person ascription.

A defensible philosophical humanism privileges not the biological species *Homo sapiens*—as those who convict it of "speciesism" allege—but human beings as sentient, rational, language-using, and culture-producing creatures. This version of humanism underlies Williams's humanistic response to evolutionary explanations of human behavior. "[I]t is not…human cultural practices that are explained by natural selection, but rather the universal human characteristics of having cultural practices, and human beings' capacity to do so. It is precisely the fact that variations and developments in cultural practices are *not* determined at an evolutionary level that makes the human characteristic of living under culture such an extraordinary evolutionary success" (188). To say that "we are essentially human animals," biologically construed, is to say that the human characteristic of living under culture is inessential to what "we" are. This, to the humanist, is not credible. Ontology must, whatever its proponents say, be conditioned by an implicit direction of interest. The humanist argues simply that the term "human," as it appears in "human animal," implies other directions of interest and dimensions of meaning, in addition to the biological ones acknowledged by the animalist.

Having contrasted humanism with the scientistic standpoint of biologism, it is essential not to assimilate it with *exceptionalism*. Exceptionalism, to reiterate, is the position that regards "human animal" as an oxymoron—human beings are too special to be grouped with any other part of the animal creation. Humanism makes no claims about human uniqueness and has no myth of exceptionalism. When fundamentalist Christians reject Darwinism on the grounds that they find it repellent that we might be descended from monkeys, they are advocating an emotive form of exceptionalism. For humanists, in contrast, the development of Darwinian theory is a great humanist success.

This humanistic picture is the one I contrast with the scientistic picture underlying neurophysiological accounts such as Raffman's. To develop it further would take us too far into general issues in philosophy of mind, however, and should be left to another occasion.

NOTES

1. Music therapists such as Colwyn Trevarthen refer to this phenomenon as "musicality"; see, for instance, Powers and Trevarthen (2010).

2. The modern system of the fine arts is discussed by Kristeller (1951 & 1952).

3. *Musik* applies to all kinds of music, while *Tonkunst* refers to Western art music and was used in that sense by Hanslick (1986); today, *Tonkunst* sounds pretentious or elitist.

4. Thus, Schafer (1977) notes that "the string quartet and urban pandemonium are historically contemporaneous" (103). See also Van Leeuwen (1999, 1).

5. Paddison (2001) echoes his comment, arguing that instrumental music was transformed from "an art form regarded as a pleasant but meaningless entertainment without cognitive value…[to] the vehicle of ineffable truths beyond conceptualisation" (318).

6. For a discussion of these views, see the section titled "What Is Syntax?" in Moore and Palazzolo (2024).
7. In particular, see my account of the notion of the "acousmatic" there and in the second edition of that book (2026).
8. The "familiar theories of sentence meaning" to which Lamarque refers are those of Davidson and Grice, discussed above.

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